The Honor of The Big Snows

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD, Author of "The Danger Trail"

CHAPTER IV.

The Fight at Dawn.

It was a new team. It had come from the trails to the east, and Jan's heart gave a sudden jump as he thought of the missionary who was expected with the overdue mail. At first he had a mind to intercept the figure laboring across the open, but without apparent reason he changed his course and approached the sledge.

As he came nearer he observed a second figure, which rose from behind

He Shot Out a Powerful Fist and Sent the Boy Reeling to the Ground.

the dogs and advanced to meet him. A dozen paces ahead of the team it stopped and waited.

"Our dogs are so near exhaustion that we're afraid to take them any nearer," said a voice. "They'd die like puppies under those packs!"

The voice thrilled Jan. He advanced with his back to the fire, so that he could see the stranger.

"You come from Churchill?" he asked.

His words were hardly a question. They were more of an excuse for him to draw nearer, and he turned a little, so that for an instant the glowing fire flashed in his eyes.

"Yes; we started from the Etawney just a week ago today."

Jan had come very near. The stranger interrupted himself to stare into the thin, fierce face that had grown like a white cameo almost within reach of him. With a startled cry he drew a step back, and Jan's violin dropped to the snow.

For no longer than a breath there was silence. The man wormed himself back into the shadows inch by inch, followed by the white face of the boy. Then there came shrilly from Jan's lips the mad shrieking of a name, and his knife flashed as he leaped at the other's breast.

The stranger was quicker than he. With a sudden movement he cleared himself of the blow, and as Jan's arm went past him, the point of the knife ripping his coat sleeve, he shot out a powerful fist and sent the boy reeling to the ground.

Stunned and bleeding, Jan dragged himself to his knees. He saw the dogs turning, heard a low voice urging them to the trail and saw the sledge disappear into the forest. He staggered from his knees to his feet and stood swaying in his weakness. Then he followed.

He forgot that he was leaving his knife in the snow, forgot that back there about the fire there were other dogs and other men. He followed, sickened by the blow, but gaining strength as he pursued. Ahead of him he could hear the sound of the toboggan and the cautious lashing of a whip over the backs of the tired huskies. The sounds filled him with fierce strength. He wiped away the warm trickle of blood that ran over his cheek and began to run, slowly at first, swinging in the easy wolf lope of the forest runner, with his elbows close to his sides.

At that pace he could have followed for hours, losing when the pack took a spurt, gaining when they lagged, an insistent Nemesis just behind when the weighted dogs lay down in their traces. When he heard the cracking of the whip growing fainter he dropped his arms straight to his sides and ran more swiftly, his brain reeling with the madness of his desire to reach the sledge, to drag from it the man who had struck him, to choke life from the face that haunted that mental picture of his, grinning at him and gloating always from the shadow world, just beyond the pale, sweet loveliness of the woman who lived in it.

He did not feel the soft, sun packed snow under the beat of his feet. He received the lash of low hanging bushes without experiencing the sensation of their sting. Only he knew that he wanted air more and more air and to get it he ran with open mouth, struggling and gasping for it and yet not knowing that Jean de Gravois would have called him a fool for the manner in which he sought it.

He heard more and more faintly the run of the sledge. Then he heard it no longer. His heart swelled in a final bursting effort, and he plunged on until at last his legs crumpled under him and he pitched face downward in the snow, like a thing stung by sudden death.

It was then, with his scratched and bleeding face, lying in the snow, that reason began to return to him. After a little while he dragged himself weakly to his knees, still panting from the mad effort he had made to overtake the sledge. From a great distance he heard faintly the noise of shouting, the whispering echo of half a hundred voices, and he knew that the sound came from the revelers at the post. It was proof to him that there had been no interruption to the carnival and that the scene at the edge of the forest had been witnessed by none. He turned again on the trail.

Where the forest broke into an open, lighted by the stars, he found blood in the footprints of the leading dog. Halfway across the open he saw where the leader had swung out from the trail and the others of the pack had crowded about him, to be urged on by the lashings of the man's whip. Other signs of the pack's growing exhaustion followed close.

The man now traveled beside the sledge where the trail was rough and rode where it was smooth and hard. The deep imprints of his heeled boots in the soft snow showed that he ran for only a short distance at a time—a hundred yards or less—and that after each running spell he brought the pack to a walk. He was heavy and lacked endurance, and this discovery brought a low cry of exultation to Jan's lips.

He fell into a dog trot. Mile after mile dropped behind him. Other miles were ahead of him, an endless wilderness of miles, and through them the pack persisted, keeping always beyond sound and vision.

The stars began fading out of the skies. Jan followed more and more slowly. There was hard breathing effort now in his running—effort that caused him physical pain and discomfort. His feet stumbled occasionally in the snow. His legs from thigh to knee began to ache with the gnawing torment that centers in the marrow bone, and with this beginning of the "runner's cramp" he was filled with a new and poignant terror.

Would the dogs beat him out? Slough ing in his trail, bleeding at every foot, would they still drag their burden beyond the reach of his vengeance? The fear fastened itself upon him, urging him to greater effort, and he called upon the last of his strength in a spurt that carried him to where the thick spruce gave place to thin bush and the bush to the barren and rocky side of a huge ridge, up which the trail climbed strong and well defined. For a few paces he followed it, then slipped and rolled back as the fatal paralysis deadened all power of movement in his limbs. He lay where he fell, moaning out his grief with wide staring eyes turned straight up into the cold gray of the starless sky.

For a long time he was motionless. Then he began slowly to crawl up the trail. Some of the dull paralytic ache was gone from his limbs, and as he worked his blood began to warm them into new strength until he stood up and sniffed like an animal in the wind that was coming over the ridge from the south.

There was something in that wind that thrilled him. It stung his nostrils to a quick sensing of the nearness of something that was human. He smelled smoke. In it there was the pungent odor of green balsam mixed with a faint perfume of pitch pine, and because the odor of pitch grew stronger as he ascended he knew that it was a small fire that was making the smoke, with none of the fierce, dry woods to burn up the smell. It was a fire hidden among the rocks, a tiny fire, over which the fleeing missioner was cooking his breakfast.

Jan almost moaned aloud in his gladness, and the old mad strength returned to his body. Near the summit of the ridge he picked up a club. It was a short, thick club with the heavy end knotted and twisted.

Cautiously he lifted his face over the rocks and looked out upon a plateau still deep in snow swept bare by the winter's winds and covered with rocks and bushes. His face was so white that at a little distance it might have been taken for a snow hare. It went whiter when a few yards away he saw the fire, the man and the dogs.

The man was close to the little blaze, his broad shoulders hunched over, steadying a small pot over the flame. Beyond him were the dogs huddled about the sledge, inanimate as death.

Jan drew himself over the rocks. Once he had seen a big footed lynx creep upon a wide awake fox, and, like that lynx, he crept upon the man beside the fire. One of the tired dogs moved, and his pointed nostrils quivered in the air. Jan lay flat in the snow. Then the dog's muzzle dropped between his paws, and the boy moved on.

Inch by inch he advanced. The inches multiplied themselves into a foot, the foot lengthened into yards, and still the man remained hunched over his simmering pot. In a flash Jan took the last leap, and his club crashed down upon the missioner's head. The man pitched over like a log, and, with a shrill cry, the boy was at his throat.

"I am Jan Thoreau!" he shrieked. "I am Jan Thoreau—Jan Thoreau come to keel you!" He dropped his club and was upon the man's chest, his slender fingers tightening like steel wire about the thick throat of his enemy. "I keel you slow—slow!" he cried as the missioner struggled weakly.

The great thick body heaved under him, and he put all his strength into his hands. Something struck him in the face. Something struck him again and again, but he felt neither the pain nor the force of it, and his voice sobbed out his triumph as he choked. The man's hands reached up and tore at his hair, but Jan saw only the missioner's mottled face growing more mottled and his eyes staring in greater agony up into his own.

"I am Jan Thoreau," he panted again and again. "I am Jan Thoreau, an I keel you—keel you!"

The blood poured from his face. It blinded him until he could no longer see the one from which he was choking life. He bent down his head to escape the blows. The man's body heaved more and more; it turned until he was half under it, but still he hung to the thick throat, as the weasel hangs in tenacious death to the jugular of its prey.

The missioner's weight was upon him in crushing force now. His huge hands struck and tore at the boy's head

There Was Death In Each of the Two Grips.

and face, and then they had fastened themselves at his neck. Jan was conscious of a terrible effort to take in breath, but he was not conscious of pain. The clutch did not frighten him. It did not make him loosen his grip. His fingers dug deeper. He strove to cry out still his words of triumph, but he could make no sound, except a gasping like that which came from between the gaping jaws of the man whose life his body and soul were fighting to smother.

There was death in each of the two grips, but the man's was stronger, and his neck was larger and tougher, so that after a time he staggered to his knees and then to his feet, while Jan lay upon his back, his face and hair red with blood, his eyes wide open and with a lifeless glare in them. The missioner looked down upon his victim in horror. As the life that had nearly ebbed out of him poured back into his body he staggered among the dogs, fastened them to the sledge and urged them down the mountain into the plain. There was soon no sound of the sledge.

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Half a mile down the ridge, where it sloped up gradually from the forests and swamps of the plain, a team of powerful malemutes were running at the head of a toboggan. On the sledge was a young half Cree woman. Now beside the sledge, now at the head of the dogs, cracking his whip and shouting joyously, ran Jean de Gravois.

He was bringing back with him a splendid young woman with big lustrous eyes and hair that shone with the gloss of a raven's wing in the sun. She laughed at him proudly as he danced and leaped beside her, replying softly in Cree, which is the most beautiful language in the world, to everything that he said.

Jean leaped and ran, cracked his caribou whip and shouted and sang until he was panting and red in the face. Just as Iowaka had called upon him to stop and get a second wind the malemutes dropped back upon their haunches where Jan Thoreau lay, twisted and bleeding, in the snow.

"What is this?" cried Jean.

He caught Jan's limp head and shoulders up in his arms and called shrilly to Iowaka, who was disentangling herself from the thick furs in which he had wrapped her.

"It is the fiddler I told you about, who lives with Williams at Post Lac Bain!" he shouted excitedly in Cree. "He has been murdered! He has been choked to death and torn to pieces in the face as if by an animal!" Jean's eyes roved about as Iowaka kneeled beside him. "What a fight!" he gasped. "See the footprints—a big man and a small boy, and the murderer has gone on a sledge!"

"He is warm," said Iowaka. "It may be that he is not dead."

Jean de Gravois sprang to his feet, his little black eyes flashing with a dangerous fire. In a single leap he was at the side of the sledge throwing off the furs and bundles and all other objects except his rifle.

"He is dead, Iowaka. Look at the purple and black in his face. It is Jean de Gravois who will catch the murderer, and you will stay here and make yourself a camp. Hoooo!" he shouted to the malemutes.

The team twisted sinuously and swiftly in the trail as he sped over the edge of the mountain. Upon the plain below he knelt upon the toboggan with his rifle in front of him and at his low, hissing commands, which reached no farther than the dogs' ears, the team stretched their long bodies in pursuit of the missioner and his huskies.

Jean knew that whoever was ahead of him was not far away, and he laughed and hunched his shoulders when he saw that his magnificent malemutes were making three times the speed of the huskies. It was a short chase. It led across the narrow plain and into a dense tangle of swamp, where the huskies had picked their way in aimless wandering until they came out in thick balsam and Banksian pine. Half a mile farther on, and the trail broke into an open which led down to the smooth surface of a lake, and two-thirds across the lake was the fleeing missioner.

(To be Continued.)

SURGERY IN ANCIENT TIMES

Trepanning Is One of the Oldest of Operations, Dating Back to Stone Age.

There is no doubt that some rough form of surgery must have existed from very ancient times, but it is strange to find that so complex and delicate an operation as trepanning is one of the oldest.

So far as actual records go, Hippocrates gives us the earliest account. He wrote treaties on fractures, dislocations and wounds of the head, in which he described the method of procedure to be followed in the case of a fractured skull. His direction was to cut away a piece of bone so that the pressure on the brain might be relieved.

There are also records about this time and later of a file being used for this purpose, which at a time when anaesthetics were undreamed of must have been, to say the least, painful.

According to Dr. T. Rice Holmes, the operation of removing pieces of bone was performed long before historic times. The effects on the skull are easily seen after death and are visible so long as the bones are preserved.

From inspection of certain skulls of the later stone age in ancient Britain, Dr. Holmes has come to the conclusion that some of these had undergone the operation, which must have been performed with a stone implement.—London Standard.

Her Comprehensive Reply.

"I ask only," in well modulated tones said the earnest, fiddle faced young man, "that you give me what you can of your love and that you never strive for my sake to deny any yearning or strangle any impulse that pants within you. Give me what you can while you can give it without grudging or regretting, but the moment you feel that it is a task to love me renounce me forever, though the verdict pierce me to the very heart."

"How cute!" returned the fluffy young thing. "But—ee—hee! hee!—yes, Willoughby!"—Puck.

Drawing a Fine Distinction.

Floorwalker—They've reduced your salary, have they?

Elevator Boy—Nope; they've cut my wages.

Early Manuscripts.

The type of letter in early manuscript was the same as that of those used on the earlier metal plates and wax tablets. All letters were capitals. Minuscule, or small lettering, as opposed to the majuscule, was invented in the seventh century. Before its invention there was no spacing between the words. There was no punctuation, unless possibly some mark between sentences. When cursive writing came into general use about the beginning of the tenth century the art was practiced by only a few highly trained scribes. This continued all through the middle ages. The scribes were artists, and they carried their art to a high degree of perfection. Many of the manuscripts of that period are very beautiful specimens of handiwork and as perfect as print.

Safety Play Counted.

The subject of "kissing before engagements for marriage" came up at a whist club of half a dozen married couples. It turned out that not one of the women had been kissed until her troth was plighted. One of the men had a poor memory: "We used to kiss, sometimes, didn't we?" he said to his wife. "No, sir," she said, with deep indignation; "you tried to, and you fought for the privilege, but you never succeeded." "Is that so?" the husband remarked: "I've kissed so many—" "What's that? What did you say?" the wife asked. There was a pause. Intense but suppressed excitement was visible on the faces of the other married men. "I say," said the husband, "I have kissed you so many times that I can't remember when I began." Then the other married men breathed more freely.